



Euthanasia and suicide in Judaism

“...The message of Judaism is that one must struggle until the last breath of life. Until the last moment, one has to live and rejoice and give thanks to the Creator...”

Dr Rachamim Melamed-Cohen, Jewsworld, March, 2002

The Jewish tradition regards the preservation of human life as one of its supreme moral values and forbids doing anything that might shorten life. However, it does not require doctors to make dying last longer than it naturally would.

Jewish law and tradition regard human life as sacred, and say that it is wrong for anyone to shorten a human life. This is because our lives are not ours to dispose of as we feel like.

All life is of infinite value, regardless of its duration or quality, because all human beings are made in the image of God, so saving someone from pain is not a reason to kill them. Nor is it lawful to kill oneself to save oneself from pain. However, there is a limit to the duty to keep people alive. If someone's life is ending and they are in serious pain, doctors have no duty to make that person suffer more by artificially extending their dying moments. It is also acceptable to ask God in prayer to remove a person from their pain and suffering.

Active euthanasia

Jewish law forbids active euthanasia and regards it as murder. There are no exceptions to this rule and it makes no difference if the person concerned wants to die.

Shortening life

It is wrong to shorten a life even if it would end very soon, because every moment of human life is considered equal in value to many years of life.

“The value of human life is infinite and beyond measure, so that any part of life - even if only an hour or a second - is of precisely the same worth as seventy years of it, just as any fraction of infinity, being indivisible, remains infinite.”

Lord Jakobovits, former UK Chief Rabbi

So even if a person is a *goses* (this word means someone who has started to die and will die within 72 hours), any action that might hasten their death - for example closing the eyes or moving a limb - is prohibited.

Passive euthanasia

Jewish law says that doctors (and patients) have a duty to preserve life, and a doctor must do everything he/she can to save a patient's life - even if the patient doesn't want them to.

However, this isn't the end of it. There is some freedom for doctors in cases where a patient is

terminally ill. Although a doctor cannot do anything that hastens death, "if there is something which is preventing the soul from departing" a doctor can remove whatever is preventing the dying person's soul from departing. In more modern language this means that if something is an impediment to the natural process of death and the patient only survives because of it, it is permitted under Jewish law to withdraw that thing. So if a patient is certain to die, and is only being kept alive by a ventilator, it is permissible to switch off the ventilator since it is impeding the natural process of death.

The relevance of pain

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach have ruled that a dying patient should not be kept alive by artificial means where the treatment does not cure the illness but merely prolongs the patient's life temporarily and the patient is suffering great pain.

Pain relief medicine can be given even though it may hasten death, as long as the dose is not certain to kill, and the intention is not to kill but to relieve pain.(Principle of Double Effect)

Hastening one's own death

Human beings don't have the right to kill themselves, so someone who is terminally ill and in great pain cannot take action to speed their own death. Even if they are mentally fit to make that choice, the rule that life is sacred prevents them from shortening their life. A passage in the Talmud tells the story of Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion, who was being burned alive by the Romans. His pupils urged him to end his suffering quickly by opening his mouth and inhaling the flames. He replied, "It is better that He who gave [me my soul] should take it rather than I should cause injury to myself." It's also against Jewish law to help someone to kill themselves, since one is not allowed to enable another person to break Jewish law.

Does the rule ban treatment that may kill?

Doctors are commanded to do their best to heal the sick and prevent suffering. So it's acceptable for a doctor to put a patient through life-endangering treatment if that is likely to extend the patient's life or reduce their pain.

Biblical precedents

The first example of Jewish euthanasia comes in the Bible:

“And a certain woman threw an upper millstone upon Abim'elech's head, and crushed his skull. Then he called hastily to the young man his armor-bearer, and said to him, "Draw your sword and kill me, lest men say of me, 'A woman killed him.'" And his young man thrust him through, and he died.

Judges 9:53-54

There's a more famous case at the start of 2 Samuel, where the seriously injured King Saul orders a young soldier to kill him, rather than let him be captured alive. When King David heard what the young soldier had done, he had him executed; to show that euthanasia was equivalent to murder, and that the defense of superior orders was valueless.